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SUBJECT: PM MALIKI DECIDES THAT IT IS TOO DANGEROUS TO OPEN
THE IZ FURTHER BEFORE THE JANUARY ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Cameron P. Munter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary. At the August 30 meeting of the International Zone (IZ) Security Joint Sub-Committee (JSC), the Government of Iraq (GOI) declared its intention to delay opening of the north-south highway bisecting the IZ until after national elections are complete. The GOI also stated that it would not make any modifications to the current barrier system in the IZ without prior concurrence from Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I). While clearly in line with Embassy and MNF-I preferences, the move came without any U.S. prompting, and the Iraqis admitted their concern that opening the highway to normal traffic now could be an invitation to more incidents similar to the August 19 bombings just outside the IZ. Prime Minister (PM) Maliki appears to have concluded that he has more to lose from another security failure in the capital than by prolonging the traffic jams wrought by current security measures. End Summary.

¶2. (S) At the regularly scheduled August meeting of the IZ Security JSC (note: the JSC coordinates implementation of Article 28 of the Security Agreement), attended by Major General Hummer, Management Counselor Jackson, Deputy Regional Security Officer Moretti, and Iraqi General Faruq al-'Arji, who heads the Prime Minister's personal military staff in the Office of the Commander in Chief (OCINC), stated that the PM had ordered a delay in the opening of the IZ segment of the July 14 highway. The six-lane road runs through central Baghdad connecting the northern and southern districts across the July 14 Bridge. Faruq clarified that in the wake of the August 19 bombings on the periphery of the IZ that temporarily shut down the Council of Representatives (COR) and devastated the Foreign Ministry (MoFA), the GOI anticipated that the threat of attacks in central Baghdad would remain at levels that would make the opening of the July 14 highway a potential vulnerability which militants would be happy to exploit.

¶3. (C) General Faruq also stated that the GOI would not undertake to move any barriers in the IZ absent prior consultation and coordination with MNF-I. According to Faruq, the OCINC will confer with the PM's National Operations Center (PMNOC) to determine at what date after the January national elections the road can be opened. In the interim, jointly planned preparations for its opening, including the placement of new barriers, and modifications to existing checkpoints, will continue so that all of the necessary security measures will be in place once the decision is made.

¶4. (C) Though neither MNF-I nor the Embassy had made any request to delay the opening of the highway beyond September

15, the target date proposed by the GOI, all U.S. stakeholders were pleased that the GOI opted to postpone. Once opened, the thoroughfare will cut the IZ in two from north to south, leaving only a two-lane underpass at the northern end of the July 14 Bridge to facilitate the movement of all IZ traffic from east to west. While the bulk of the U.S. presence in the IZ is now concentrated in its western half, including the Embassy, Forward Operating Base (FOB) Prosperity, and FOB Union III, the eastern portion is home to USAID, Phoenix Base, LZ Washington, numerous contractor Qto USAID, Phoenix Base, LZ Washington, numerous contractor support facilities, and key GOI institutions such as the PM,s Office, Ministry of Defense, and the COR. Though the GOI must at some point open this route, forcing all of the internal IZ traffic through a single narrow chokepoint is clearly preferable later rather than sooner, especially in the face of recent GOI security failures at the margins of the IZ.

15. (S) Comment: The PM has been under considerable pressure from Baghdad residents to improve the traffic congestion that plagues the capital. Burdened by more than twice as many vehicles as it is designed to handle, Baghdad,s road network suffers in part because the IZ, sitting at the city,s core, blocks several of the highways that could help to relieve much of the gridlock. Combined with the omnipresent barriers that narrow already crowded streets, the closed highways are a source of unending frustration for millions of the PM,s constituents. His decision to postpone the opening of the July 14 Highway appears to reflect a realization that he will have more to lose from another spectacular attack in Baghdad than from the snarled traffic that the IZ,s security measures produce.

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End Comment.
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